

Statement of Al Franken
Media Forum
“Media Bias and the Future of Freedom of the Press”
May 24, 2005

Thank you, Congressman, for calling this forum, and allowing us to testify in this august chamber. Last fall on the eve of the 2004 Presidential elections, the Program on International Policy Attitudes, a research group at the University of Maryland, did a survey of 968 Americans. P.I.P.A. is an academic, non-partisan research institute. My former Congressman, Bill Frenzel, a Minnesota Republican, sits on its board.

The P.I.P.A. study found that 72% of Bush supporters believed that before the war, Iraq either had weapons of mass destruction or a major program for building them.

Of course, it didn't.

75% of Bush supporters believed that Iraq was either directly involved in 9/11 or gave al Qaeda substantial support.

Neither, of course, was true.

But to me the most depressing statistics is this: 58% of Bush supporters thought that, if before the war intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al Qaeda, the U.S. should not have gone to war.

That's just an opinion. But it's an opinion I, and 92% of Kerry supporters, happened to agree with. But in part because of their misperceptions of reality, a large majority of Bush supporters still think invading Iraq had been a great idea.

Why did so many Bush supporters get such fundamental facts so totally wrong? Was it because they hadn't heard that Charles Duelfer, Bush's handpicked weapons inspector, had concluded that Iraq had had no active weapons program, let alone actual weapons of mass destruction, and that we had gotten it “almost all wrong?” Duelfer's Iraq Survey Group sent 1750 experts to examine 1200 sites and conducted interview upon interview with everyone from “high-value” Iraqi detainees to former Iraqi weapons scientists living in exile to Saddam Hussein himself, and concluded that he had nothingb. No weapons of mass destruction. Let's put it this way. At the start of the Iraq war, Saddam Hussein had as many or fewer weapons of mass destruction as I had. And I didn't have any.

And hadn't Bush supporters heard of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, which held a series of extremely high profile hearings throughout the Spring of 2004 and, on July 22nd of that year, released its final report, which concluded that there was no credible evidence of a collaborative relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda?

Actually, Bush supporters did know about the Duelfer Report and the 9/11 Commission. And what they “knew” was that these unimpeachable sources had “confirmed” what a vast majority of them “thought” the Bush Administration was saying: that the war was justified because Saddam had had a major WMD program and had provided substantial support to al Qaeda.

A huge chunk of Bush voters, in other words, were delusional. Not necessarily because of mental illness, but rather because of a coordinated propaganda machine capable of causing symptoms closely resembling mental illness.

The propaganda machine I'm talking about is a combination of what I call the right wing media in league with the Bush Administration and corporate-funded think tanks and abetted by an intimidated mainstream media scared of its own shadow.

Let's take the mainstream media first. For years Americans have been told by the right that the mainstream media has a liberal bias. There are many biases in the mainstream media. The first bias is toward making a profit. That means getting an audience. That's why there's a bias toward the sensational, toward scandal, conflict, sex, and violence. During 1998, the so-called liberal media gave us all Monica all the time. There are some news organizations that did not succumb to that temptation and I'd like to take a moment to site them. Sailing Magazine and American Grocer Monthly.

The profit motive also creates a bias toward news that's cheap to produce. Instead of investigative reports on issues facing the electorate, TV news gives us political coverage featuring talking heads discussing horse race and process. Then there's pack mentality. And the bias of laziness.

The mainstream media has plenty of biases. But asking whether the mainstream media has a liberal or a conservative bias is a little like asking if the problem with al Qaeda is that they use too much oil in their hummos. Congressman, you might think their hummos is too dry. I might think it's too oily. But that's beside the point. The problem with al Qaeda is that they want to kill us.

But there is a right-wing media. And we know who they are. They're The Fox News Channel, the Wall St. Journal editorial page, the Washington Times, and, of course, talk radio.

According to a recent Gallup Poll 22% of Americans get their news primarily from talk radio. And until Air America Radio came along, political talk radio was virtually a right wing monolith. At my show we monitor right wing radio, as does David Brock at Media Matters for America. And I can tell you that they routinely lie, they spread hate, and I chose to do the job I'm doing right now as a host on Air America because someone needed to push back.

I'm going to hold to my remarks to three to five minutes allotted, but when we get back to the question/answer period, I'd love to provide with some great examples of the lies and lying liars who tell them. Thank you.